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AUTHOR Schafer, John C.
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ABSTRACT

An assignment for high school or college students that requires them to interpret what a poem may have communicated to the poet's contemporaries can be valuable in that it teaches them that there is more than one way to interpret a poem and that the rules of interpretation are neither universal nor unchanging. Such an approach to poetry interpretation repudiates the philosophy of the New Critics that states that a reader should ask "how" and not "what" a poem means and that it is wrong to limit a poem's meaning by identifying it completely with authorial intention. However, such an approach permits students to read poems in their biographical and historical context and to gain practice in stating a thesis clearly (their interpretation of the poet's original intention) and to defend that thesis with proper evidence. It also allows them to accomplish a literary critical paper and a library research paper in one assignment. (AEA)

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Interpretation Theory and Teaching Students How to Write about Poetry

John C. Schafer

In the 1950's and early 1960's New Critical approaches to literature were accepted by most teachers of literature in secondary schools and colleges. Now, however, this consensus has broken down. In articles in the leading journals some scholars argue that meaning lies in the text, some say it is identical to the intention of the author, others insist it resides in the mind of the reader, still others maintain that texts have no determinate meaning at all. What should we teachers do when faced with such a confusion of possibilities? One alternative is to ignore the hubbub altogether, think "This too will pass," and go on teaching literature the way we have always taught it. I'd like to describe another alternative, an approach that I experimented with in a freshman composition class at the University of Michigan, but which should work in an advanced high school class as well. The aim of my project was twofold: to give students practice in writing a thesis-guided paper and to introduce them to a new way of reading poetry.

I decided right away that I wanted my students to write about what they thought a poem meant. To arrive at this decision I had to repudiate some of my New Critical training because, of course, the New Critics said one should ask <u>how</u> not <u>what</u> a poem means. Searching for what a poem means, the New Critics warned again and again, leads to the heresy of paraphrase. "A poem should not mean but be." That is, said William K. Wimsatt, "an epigram worth quoting in every essay on poetry."[1] Instead of looking for meaning one should look for ironic contrasts. The model for the perfect New Critical essay were those by Cleanth Brooks, many of which are

collected in the Well Wrought Urn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1947). Brooks, for example, finds ironic complexity in Wordsworth's "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge" because, he argues, it is "only when the poet sees the city under the semblance of death that he can see it as actually alive" (p. 7). He finds ironic complexity in Herrick's "Corinna's Going a-Maying" because its dominant tone of pagan celebration is undercut by Christian references to sin (p. 69).

The New Critics warned that in addition to the heresy of paraphrase one must also avoid the intentional fallacy: using the intention of the author as a standard for judging the success of a literary work. Searching after intention, Wimsatt and Beardsley argued, leads to a confusion of personal and poetic studies, to an undesirable mixing or psychology and criticism. In explicating a poem one should rely on internal or public evidence, evidence which because it is in the poem or the language is available to everyone. One should shun external or private evidence, such as the reported conversation of a poet explaining why he wrote the poem.[2] The New Critics were, of course, reacting to their predecessors the biographical and historical critics who, they felt, instead of reading poems as poems used them as documents to prove or disprove a thesis regarding the life of the poet or the age in which he lived. "Back to the text!" became the slogan of Brooks and Wimsatt. Never mind the biographical or historical context of the poem. Let's see what remains after we have excised the poem from its psychological and cultural matrix.

I had accepted the New Critics' way of reading poems and probably would have encouraged my students to approach poetry this way if I had not encountered E. D. Hirsch's works The Validity of Interpretation (New

Haven: Yale University Press, 1967) and The Aims of Interpretation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976). In these works Hirsch argues that the intentional fallacy, at least as it was applied by the followers of the New Critics, is a pernicious doctrine because it ignores a fact concerning texts: namely, that they are written by someone to say something to someone else. "When we fail to conjoin a man's intentions to his words," argues Hirsch, "we lose the soul of speech, which is to convey meaning and to understand what is intended to be conveyed" (Aims, p. 90). Hirsch distinguishes meaning from significance. The meaning of a text is what the author originally intended it to mean. Meaning is stable: it doesn't change with time or from reading to reading. Significance, on the other hand, is a relationship between meaning and something else: a person, a situation, or a conception (Validity, p. 8). Unlike meaning, significance changes: the meaning of a poem by Donne remains forever what Donne intended it to mean, but the significance the poem has for us may differ from that which it had for Donne's contemporaries. This distinction between meaning and significance is the basis for a parallel distinction between interpretation and criticism. An interpreter looks for meaning; a critic is concerned with significance (p. 143).

Reading Hirsch reassured me that it was all right to ask students to write about meaning, but he also disturbed my thinking about my assignment by forcing me to define meaning more exactly. If my students chose a poem by, say, Matthew Arnold, did I want them to describe what the poem communicated to Arnold's contemporaries or what it communicated to them? Did I want them to be interpreters or critics?

I decided I wanted them to become interpreters and search after original meaning because I became enthusiastic about the kind of reading this search would entail. When I was a student, teachers asked me to discuss poems before I knew anything about the biography of their authors or the history of the age in which they lived. While I enjoyed reading poetry this way some of the time, I didn't like being made to do it all the time. I also became convinced that if I knew more about the world in which the people who wrote the poems lived, I would understand better what they were saying. One reason, therefore, having become a teacher, for encouraging my students to search for meaning as Hirsch defines it--as the original intention of the author--was that I knew this search would force them to read poems in their biographical and historical context. Many interpretations are possible, Hirsch argues; one can never be certain what the meaning of a poem is--what the poet intended to say in writing it. But some meanings are clearly more <u>probable</u> than others. An interpreter must read the poem closely, but read also about the life and times of the poet, and read some of his other works, then decide on the meaning the poet most probably intended his poem to have. One must be ready to defend one's conclusion as to meaning by pointing out that it is more plausible than other interpretations because it coheres more closely with the typical outlook of the poet, an outlook which one has to piece together through research (<u>Validity</u>, p. 238).

This process Hirsch calls "validation by coherence" and as an example of how it works he discusses two interpretations of Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," one by Cleanth Brooks and one by F. W. Bateson.[3] In Brooks' interpretation, the image of Lucy whirling around "in earth's

diurnal course" is a horrible image; the whole poem, Brooks suggests, emphasizes deadness. Bateson, however, finds a "pantheistic magnificance" in the whirling image. He maintains that the poem emphasizes life because in the end of the poem "Lucy is actually more alive now that she is dead, because she is a part of the life of nature and not just a human 'thing.'"[4] Bateson's interpretation is more probable, argues Hirsch, because it coheres with Wordsworth's outlook when he wrote the poem. In 1799 Wordsworth would have regarded a return to the rocks, stones and trees of earth as a return to life; the "inconsolability and bitter irony" that Brooks finds in the poem were not aspects of the poet's typical outlook (Validity, p. 239).

Besides enabling students to read poems in context, I thought, this assignment would have another advantage. My students, like most I guess, lacked skill in discovering a thesis, stating it clearly, and defending it with the proper evidence. Searching for meaning defined as original intention would, I thought, encourage students to practice this three step process. In Hirsch's approach to interpretation one states an hypothesis regarding meaning and then searches for evidence to validate it. I felt this was a movement of the mind that all my students, the future scientists as well as the future English majors, would find useful. Students would go to the library, I hoped, not to collect some biographical data on the poet for use as filler, or to find out from the experts where the ironic complexities lay, but in search of support for an interpretation they had elected to defend. I became enthusiastic about accomplishing the literary critical paper and the library research paper in one assignment.

So I carefully explained the approach, then duplicated four poems, and asked them to try it out in a four or five page paper.

Since they had never talked about poetry in this way before, there was some understandable anxiety at the start, but ultimately they liked this assignment. Students appreciated my statement that different interpretations were possible. Several told me they disliked teachers who insisted that only one interpretation--usually theirs--was correct. They readily accepted the idea that they were to choose the most plausible interpretation and defend it. I also sensed that the assignment did communicate to many in the class that research with a purpose can be pleasurable. On a questionnaire handed out after it was over most said it was a challenging and useful exercise. The papers I received were good in many respects. Some students overemphasized external biographical and historical evidence and slighted evidence from the poem, but most papers were well-organized defenses of a thesis regarding the meaning of one of the four poems.

What troubled me was not what the assignment was teaching them about writing--I decided it was teaching them some useful things about arriving at a thesis and using evidence--but what it was leading them to believe about poetry. One of the four poems I suggested they write on was Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Karma," a sonnet about a businessman who at Christmas time spots a Salvation Army Santa on a street corner and gives him a dime to absolve some guilt he feels for financially wrecking a business associate. One student determined from her research that this poem was an expression of the guilt Robinson felt for not helping his brother Herman's family after his brother lost much of the Robinson family money through some unwise speculation in Western real estate. The student marshalled her evidence quite well and managed to prove that her interpretation was

at least within the realm of possibility. I worried, however, that Hirsch's method was forcing on this student a rather impoverished conception of Robinson's poem. "Karma" might be in part an expression of Robinson's guilt for being unsympathetic to his brother, but I was reluctant to assume or let my students assume that this was all the poem meant.

I had similar misgivings as I did the assignment along with my students. I chose Frost's "The Road Not Taken." In doing my research I read Frost biographer Lawrence Thompson's explanation that Frost wrote this poem to chide his Welsh friend Edward Thomas. Lawrence explains that during Frost's stay with Thomas in England Thomas took Frost on long nature walks. When they returned he always insisted that if they had taken another road they would have found more interesting specimens. Frost wrote part of the poem before leaving England and finished it in New Hampshire. When it was done, he sent a copy to his Welsh friend, but Thomas did not realize he was being gently mocked, perhaps because at the time Thomas was agonizing over whether to enlist in the army. In 1915 he did enlist.[5] In his biography, Thompson also mentions a tape recording of a speech Frost made at the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference in which Frost says, in reference to this poem: "I wasn't talking about myself there, but about a friend who had gone off to war, a person, who, whichever road he went, would be sorry he didn't go the other."[6] This and other hints make it fairly clear that Frost wrote the poem with Thomas in mind.

While I found this evidence useful in bolstering my feeling that the poem was mocking those who melodramatically exaggerate the importance of decisions made early in life, I was reluctant to identify the meaning of the poem with the original situation, with Frost's experience with his

Welsh friend. But I was also reluctant to fall back on the New Critical position and argue that Frost's experience with Thomas was irrelevant to the meaning of the poem.

I then read Paul Ricoeur's Interpretation Theory; Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976) where I found a compromise position that I think more correctly captures the quality of written texts. Ricoeur is in partial agreement with the New Critics. He acknowledges that in their article on the intentional fallacy Wimsatt and Beardsley emphasize an important quality of written texts. It is true, Ricoeur says, that for a written text

> the author's intention and the meaning of the text cease to coincide. . . . Inscription becomes synonymous with the semantic autonomy of the text, which results from the disconnection of the mental intention of the author from the verbal meaning of the text, of what the author meant and what the text means. The text's career escapes the finite horizon lived by its author. What the text means now matters more than what the author meant when he wrote it. (pp.29-30)

Hirsch, Ricoeur continues, is wrong to make the author's original intention the sole basis for determining what a written text means: "In fact, . . ." says Ricoeur, "the intention of the author is lost as a psychical event. Moreover, the intention of writing has no other expression than the verbal meaning of the text itself" (p. 100).

But the New Critics who believe in the semantic autonomy of texts are also wrong, Ricoeur argues. If Hirsch's approach is too psychologized, the New Critics' approach is too "de-psychologized." Hirsch is right to point out that the soul of speech is lost when we fail to join a man's intentions with his words. If there is an intentional fallacy there is also the "fallacy of the absolute text." By fallacy of the absolute text Ricoeur means the New Critical practice of "hypostasizing the text as an

authorless entity." Hirsch commits the intentional fallacy by overlooking the semantic autonomy of the text; the New Critics commit the fallacy of the absolute text by forgetting that a text "remains a discourse told by somebody, said by someone to someone else about something" (p. 30). In other words, a poem is both discourse and text, both a speech act with ties to a communicative situation, and a semantically autonomous object removed from this situation. An interpreter grasps the meaning of an inscribed discourse or text only by understanding that this meaning is the result of a dialectic between the text as dialogic event and the text as semantically autonomous object.

Applied to Frost's poem, Ricoeur's dialectic would, I think, lead one to the following conclusions. "The Road Not Taken" is what Frost intended it to be: a gentle joke on his friend Edward Thomas. It was in a way addressed to his friend and so when he finished it, Frost put it in an envelope and sent it to him. But in this poem about decision-making Frost is not speaking only to Edward Thomas. Love is a more personal subject than making decisions, but, as T. S. Eliot has pointed out, even lovers do not write love poetry solely for the eyes of their beloved.[7] When a text is inscribed, Ricoeur says, the "narrowness of the dialogical relation explodes," the text becomes liberated from the face-to-face situation.[8] "The Road Not Taken," like all written texts, is potentially addressed to anyone who knows how to read.

When my students turned in their papers I duplicated several and we discussed them in class. I encouraged them not only to comment on their classmates' papers but also to criticize the approach to interpretation I had asked them to apply. Although most were intrigued by the challenge

of reconstructing the author's original intention, like me they felt that it was wrong to limit a poem's meaning by identifying it completely with authorial intention. They didn't use words like "semantic autonomy of the text" and "dialogic event," but they insisted that the meaning had to be in the poem as well as in the author. They were impressed with how becoming familiar with a poet's life and times helps one understand a poem. They were particularly impressed with the paper of one student who had researched thoroughly the social and religious climate of 19th century England and had used his knowledge skillfully in defending his thesis regarding the meaning of Arnold's "Dover Beach." But at the same time they insisted that they were included in the audience Arnold, Robinson, and Frost intended for their poems. They rebelled against any notion of textual meaning which would not allow the poems to speak to them.

I think it was a valuable assignment--because it taught students something about writing, about poetry, and about critical theory. It didn't introduce them to the complete panorama of possibilities regarding the interpretation of literary texts. Reader-centered approaches such as those advocated by David Bleich and Norman Holland were not covered, for example. But at least it taught students that there is more than one way to read a poem. Because not only a poem but also the way one reads poetry was an object of inquiry, they learned that the rules of interpretation are neither universal nor unchanging.

NOTES

[1] The Verbal Icon (Lexington, Ky.: Farrar, Straus, & Cudahy, 1954), p. 81.

[2] William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," in The Verbal Icon, p. 10.

[3] Cleanth Brooks, "Irony as a Principle of Structure," in Literary Opinion in America, ed. M. D. Zabel (2d ed. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), p. 736; F. W. Bateson, English Poetry: A Critical Introduction (London: Longmans & Green, 1950), pp. 33, 80-81.

[4] Bateson, pp. 80-81.

[5] Lawrence Thompson, Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915-1938 (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970), pp. 87-89.

[6] Ibid., note 7-a, p. 548.

[7] On Poetry and Poets (New York: Noonday Press, 1961), p. 96.

[8] Paul Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," Social Research, 38 (1971), 537.